

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

October 8, 2021

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
Hubert H. Humphrey Building
200 Independence Ave, S.W.
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Becerra:

The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened a mental health crisis nationwide that long existed in our country and it demands increased funding, resources, and lifelines for all Americans. We write to you today to applaud your creation in May of the Behavioral Health Coordinating Council (BHCC) and to encourage you to take additional actions to improve the delivery of mental health services for all Americans, for the duration of the global pandemic and beyond.

The BHCC is needed to lead a coalescing of federal resources to promote public awareness of mental health conditions, and to provide critical information plus support to individuals and families affected by mental illness. Our message at the highest levels of the federal government needs to be loud, clear, and inclusive in this moment: mental well-being is equally as important as physical well-being.

The effects of COVID-19 have been well documented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). A 2020 CDC report found that 40% of American adults reported struggling with mental health or substance use, 31% experienced anxiety/depression symptoms, 26% experienced trauma/stressor-related disorder symptoms (TSRD), 13% started or increased substance use, and 11% considered suicide. The prevalence of behavioral health problems doubling from about 20% in 2019 to 40% in 2020 further shows the immediate need for this action.

Communities of color (Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native Americans), children, and essential workers have been experiencing higher rates of mental illness during this pandemic, while at the same time, fear of the coronavirus, isolation from loved ones, and economic stress are taking a heavy toll on the mental well-being of all of our communities. We hope the BHCC will work to address these issues immediately. The well-being of Americans is a vital issue that affects not only quality of life, but also the health of communities, families and our country's businesses and economic recovery.

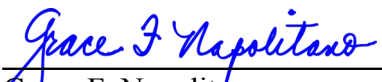
The BHCC should also oversee a national de-stigmatization campaign. Tragically, because of the stigma associated with mental illness, many people are too ashamed or embarrassed to seek the help they need for themselves or their loved ones. A national campaign would break through that

stigma, express compassion for those who struggle with mental health issues and draw attention to the proven methods that can help change lives for the better. We must work to educate all Americans on this important topic and highlight the need to take care of our emotional well-being in the same way we prioritize physical health. We must also take the necessary steps to understand and address the unique needs of communities of color.

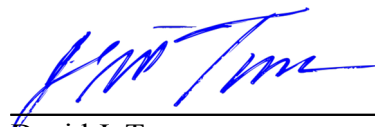
Lastly, we ask the department to review H.R. 1385, the Behavioral Health Coordination and Communication Act (Trone, D-MD). The bill would establish, within the Executive Office of the President, the position of Interagency Coordinator for Behavioral Health to coordinate federal programs and activities concerning mental health and substance use disorders. This bill would require federal departments and agencies to notify the coordinator when developing or implementing policies related to behavioral health. Further coordination at the highest rungs of government would increase the access and availability of mental health resources for all.

Thank you for your prompt consideration of this serious matter, and we look forward to working with the Behavioral Health Coordinating Council to address the ongoing mental health crisis.

Sincerely,



Grace F. Napolitano
Member of Congress



David J. Trone
Member of Congress



Paul D. Tonko
Member of Congress



Brian Fitzpatrick
Member of Congress



Marcy Kaptur
Member of Congress



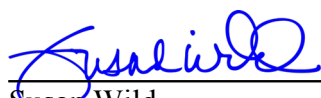
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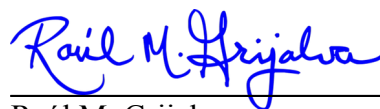
Katie Porter
Member of Congress



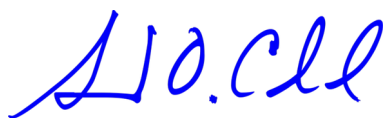
Nikema Williams
Member of Congress



Dwight Evans
Member of Congress



Raúl M. Grijalva
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Salud Carbajal
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Bill Foster
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Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.
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Josh Gottheimer
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Nanette Diaz Barragán
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